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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000742

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [KWMN](#) [MU](#)  
SUBJECT: C-NE7-00774: OMAN FORGES AHEAD IN PREPARING FOR  
FALL ELECTIONS

REF: A. STATE 55848

[B](#). MUSCAT 181  
[C](#). 06 MUSCAT 1468

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GARY A. GRAPPO FOR REASONS 1.4 (b, d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) A total of 717 candidates, including 20 women, have been certified to run in national elections on October 27 for the Majlis al-Shura. The Omani government has worked aggressively to increase the number of registered voters, including by sending "awareness teams" to address employees at government offices and major private companies. The results may have been somewhat disappointing, however, as the deadline for voter registration was extended for three months until July 31. Regulations on official campaign activities limit outreach to voters, but candidates often campaign informally at social events and many rely heavily on tribal connections to win their electoral races. While press editorials have generally backed the government's voter registration drive, some articles have surprisingly questioned the utility of casting a ballot for a body often seen as failing to seriously benefit citizens. On-line commentaries and polls indicate that voter apathy continues to plague the government's efforts to increase participation in the elections. End Summary.

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ELECTIONS SET AND CANDIDATES NAMED  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Oman's Ministry of Interior announced on July 19 that national elections for the Majlis al-Shura, the lower house of the country's bicameral advisory body, will be held on October 27. Previously, the Under Secretary for the Ministry of Interior, Mohammed bin Sultan al-Busaidi, told press on May 29 that 717 candidates have been approved to run for seats in the Majlis al-Shura. (Note: Over a month earlier, the Ministry of Interior disclosed that 818 Omanis had registered to be candidates in the election. No reason was given why the final number had been pared back, but presumably some of the 101 individuals not on the approved list chose to withdraw their names, while others failed to meet statutory age, educational and character requirements. End Note.) Of the 717 approved candidates, 20 are women, compared to 16 women -- two of whom were elected -- out of 570 candidates in the 2003 national elections. Seven of the current 20 female candidates are from the governorate of Muscat, with another seven from the coastal al-Batinah region in the north. Three of the women are running in the Musandam peninsula, two in the governorate of Dhofar in the far south, and one in the al-Thahira region.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Large tribes dominated the candidate list in

non-urban districts ("wilayats"). In the sparsely-populated al-Wusta region, for example, more than 90% of the candidates hail from the same few tribes. Candidates for urban area districts, especially in greater Muscat, are more diverse and include a larger number of first-time participants. Overall, 18 of the 83 current Majlis al-Shura members chose not to run for re-election. It is widely expected that a sizable number of candidates will drop out of the race before the elections due to low support or after negotiating deals with their competitors.

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VOTER REGISTRATION EXTENDED  
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14. (U) As reported previously (refs A, B), the Omani government has made a concerted effort to encourage Omanis to register to vote. Throughout the spring, Oman TV and local papers ran frequent announcements urging citizens to register. In April, government "awareness teams," including both men and women, visited nearly every Omani ministry in Muscat to show employees a brief documentary on the Majlis al-Shura, explain voter registration forms, and answer questions about the elections. (Note: A large majority of Omani citizens work in the public sector. End Note.) The teams also visited large private companies, as well as government offices in districts outside of Muscat, to prod Omanis to become registered voters.

15. (U) On April 28, two days before the end of the voter registration period, the Ministry of Interior announced that citizens would be allowed to register for the Majlis al-Shura elections for three additional months (i.e., until July 31). The central elections committee at the Ministry of Interior made a final public appeal in local media on July 25, urging

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Omanis who had not yet registered to do so the following (and final) week.

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CAMPAIGN DO'S AND DON'TS  
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16. (SBU) Given uncertainty among election candidates on permissible campaign activities, Under Secretary al-Busaidi of the Interior Ministry, who also serves as the chairman of the central elections committee, attempted to clarify applicable campaign rules in an April 3 interview with government-owned Arabic daily "Oman." Al-Busaidi stated that campaigning is banned at all government establishments and mosques. Candidates are allowed to formally meet with voters, he explained, but only in a specified venue after receiving approval from the relevant district election committee. Similarly, according to al-Busaidi, public campaign propaganda is limited to posters placed on designated "notice boards."

17. (U) In an April 30 press interview, Ministry of Information Under Secretary Abdullah al-Hausani -- who chairs the government's elections media committee -- said that candidates are permitted to place press ads and mount posters in specified areas containing information on their background and qualifications, and to meet with voters in a public tent or "Majlis," upon the approval of their district's election committee. He stressed that candidates are banned from "defaming" others or from making pledges that they are "not able to fulfill."

18. (C) According to contacts, many candidates choose to avoid restrictions on formal public campaign activities by campaigning "informally" at social functions such as weddings, parties and clan gatherings. Some candidates reportedly do little campaigning at all once they secure the support of key tribal leaders, confident that members of these tribes will heed the voting advice of their sheikhs

regardless of candidate outreach efforts.

¶9. (SBU) One area not specifically addressed by campaign regulations is use of the Internet. A handful of candidates have taken advantage of this ambiguity by creating websites displaying their photos, resumes and other information such as a proposed "action plan," although these sites studiously avoid directly criticizing current government policies. Omanis visiting Oman-focused Internet chatrooms have also posted endorsements of certain candidates, usually someone they know personally such as a friend or family member.

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GETTING THE LOGISTICS IN PLACE  
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¶10. (U) The Ministry of Interior announced in July that 101 "voting centers," evenly distributed throughout country's electoral districts, will be open for balloting on election day. In addition, Omani embassies in the following ten countries will accept votes from Omani citizens abroad: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Malaysia. To tabulate ballots, the Under Secretary of the Interior Ministry signed an agreement on

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July 9 with Muscat-based Bahwan Cybertech Company for the purchase of electronic vote sorting machines -- a deal valued at 500,000 Omani rials (USD 1.3 million).

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PRESS COMMENTARIES  
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¶11. (SBU) Editorials in Oman's highly constrained press have shown a surprising breadth of opinion towards the upcoming elections. Some op-ed pieces predictably praised the government's voter registration drive, noted the important role played by the Majlis al-Shura, and highlighted the civic duty of Omanis to participate in the Majlis elections. Others, however, were more critical or questioning. A May 5 editorial in Arabic daily "Shabiba" by Mohammed al-Bulushi (a PA-sponsored Murrow Journalism Fellows program alumnus) asserted that the Majlis al-Shura needed to be "empowered" and granted more legislative authority in order to attract more citizen interest, "otherwise it will continue to be viewed as a body of tribal representatives discussing water, electricity and waste management services."

¶12. (U) An article in semi-independent "Al Watan" claimed that the government election awareness campaign had turned into a "disaster" at one venue when a team member asserted that a significant percentage of current Majlis al-Shura members, particularly those from rural tribal areas, were functionally illiterate. In urging Omanis to cast their

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votes wisely, an editorial in government-owned "Oman" stated that there are three types of candidates for the Majlis: those who "try to bribe voters with money;" those who "bribe voters with luncheons and buffets;" and those who "are true nationalists who understand the real value of the Majlis."

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ON-LINE DISCUSSIONS  
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¶13. (C) Following the announcement of the date for the Majlis al-Shura elections, visitors to Oman's principal Internet discussion group (www.Omania2.net) posted mostly negative remarks on the subject. One person suggested that no one vote in Majlis elections until the institution was "given real powers." Another considered calling for a boycott of the elections and described the Majlis as "a body without a hand, foot or even eyes." An earlier poll conducted at the same website revealed that roughly 75% of

the respondents did not plan to vote in the Majlis al-Shura elections. In addition to statements critical of the Majlis' usefulness, some Omani bloggers and chatroom participants complained that candidates had not yet presented platforms or taken positions on important issues. "No program, no trust, no vote," were the on-line comments of one Omani.

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COMMENT  
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¶14. (C) The extension of the registration deadline indicates that the government's unprecedented voter awareness efforts have failed to fully meet expectations. (Note: The government has not disclosed the current number of registered voters. End Note.) It is unclear exactly who or what is the driving force behind the "get out of the vote" campaign, but efforts to seriously increase the number of voters are solidly in line with the stated goal of the Sultan and senior officials to increase citizen participation in government. As reported ref B, the Majlis al-Shura, while far from a vigorous legislative body and with more than a few non-contributing members, often suffers unfairly from claims of being "useless" as some of its legislative review functions are intentionally kept out of the public eye. Attempts to dispel this negative image will be key in overcoming voter apathy.  
GRAPPO